

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE SOVEREIGN SERVANT

John 13–17 is our Lord's "*farewell message*" to His beloved disciples, climaxing with His intercessory prayer for them and for us. However, Jesus added a significant "*action section*" to His message when He washed His disciples' feet. It was an object lesson they could not forget.

In this passage, we see our Lord in a fourfold relationship: to His Heavenly Father (John 13:1–5), to Simon Peter (John 13:6–11), to all the disciples (John 13:12–17), and to Judas (John 13:18–35). In each of these sections of John's Gospel, we will discover a special message, a spiritual truth to help us in our own Christian life.

HUMILITY: Jesus and the Father (John 13:1–5) *"¹Now before the Feast of the Passover, Jesus knowing that His hour had come that He would depart out of this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end. ² And during supper, the devil having already put into the heart of Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon, to betray Him, ³ Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come forth from God and was going back to God, ⁴ got up from supper, and laid aside His garments; and taking a towel, He tied it around Himself. ⁵ Then He poured water into the washbasin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel which He had tied around Himself."*

Jesus had entered Jerusalem on Sunday, and on Monday had cleansed the temple. Tuesday was a day of conflict as the religious leaders sought to trip Him up and get evidence to arrest Him (cf. Matthew 21–25). Wednesday was probably a day of rest, but on Thursday He met in the Upper Room with His disciples in order to observe Passover.

The emphasis in John 13:1–3 is on *what our Lord knew*, and in John 13:4–5 on *what our Lord did*. Jesus knew that "*His hour was come*." More than any of the Gospel writers, John emphasized the fact that Jesus lived on a "heavenly timetable" as He did the Father's will.

What was this divinely appointed "hour"? It was the time when He would be glorified through His death, resurrection, and ascension. From the human point of view, it meant *suffering*; but from the divine point of view, it meant *glory*. Jesus would soon leave this world and return to the Father who sent Him. When the servant of God is in the will of God, he is immortal until his work is done. They could not even arrest Jesus, let alone kill Him, until the right hour had arrived.

Jesus also knew that Judas would betray Him. Judas is mentioned eight times in John's Gospel, more than in any of the other Gospels. Satan had entered into Judas (Luke 22:3), and now he would give him the necessary thought to bring about the arrest and crucifixion of the Son of God. The word translated "*put*" in John 13:2 literally means "*to throw*." It reminds us of the fiery darts of our enemy (Ephesians 6:16). Of course, Unlike those of us who are born again, Judas did not have a "shield of faith" to ward off Satan's attacks (cf. John 6:64–71).

Finally, Jesus knew that the Father had given Him all things (John 13:3). This statement parallels John 3:35 (cf. Matthew 11:27). Even in His humiliation, our Lord had all things through His Father. He was poor and yet He was rich. Because Jesus knew who He was, where He came from, what He had, and where He was going, He was complete master of the situation. You and I as believers know that we have been born of God, that we are one day going to God, and that in Christ we have all things. When we are confident of these truths, we are able to follow our Lord's example and serve others.

What Jesus knew determined *what Jesus did* (John 13:4–5). The disciples must have been shocked when they saw their Master rise from supper, lay aside His outer garments, wrap a towel around His waist, take a basin of water, and wash their feet. Jewish servants did not wash their masters' feet, though Gentile slaves might do it. It was a menial task, and yet Jesus did it!

Jesus knew that there was a competitive spirit in the hearts of His disciples. In fact, within a few minutes, the men were disputing over which of them was the greatest (Luke 22:24–30). He gave them an unforgettable lesson in humility, and by His example, He rebuked their selfishness and pride. It is certainly an illustration of what Paul wrote years later in Philippians 2:1–16. Peter must have recalled the event when he wrote his first epistle and urged his readers to "*be clothed with humility*" (1 Peter 5:5).

Too often we confuse "*the poor in spirit*" (Matthew 5:3) with the "poor-spirited," and true humility with timidity and inferiority. The Father had put all things into the Son's hands, *yet Jesus picked up a towel and a basin!* His humility was not born of poverty, but of riches. He was rich, yet He became poor (2 Corinthians 8:9).

It is remarkable how the Gospel of John reveals the humility of our Lord even while exalting His deity: "*The Son can do nothing of Himself*" (John 5:19, 30). "*For I came down from heaven, not to do Mine own will*" (John 6:38). "*My doctrine is not Mine*" (John 7:16). "*And I seek not My own glory*" (John 8:50). "*The word which you hear is*

not Mine" (John 14:24). Of course, His ultimate expression of humility was His death on the cross.

The Sovereign Jesus took the place of a servant. He had all things in His hands, yet He picked up a towel. He was Lord and Master, yet He served His followers. It has well been said that humility is not thinking mainly of yourself; *it is simply not thinking of yourself at all*. True humility grows out of our relationship with the Father. If our desire is to know and do the Father's will so that we might glorify His name, then we can experience the joy of following Christ's example and serving others.

Just like the disciples that night, we desperately need this lesson in humility. We must not let the church be filled with a worldly spirit of competition where believers vie with one another to see who is the greatest. We tend to grow in knowledge, but not in grace (see 2 Peter 3:18). Andrew Murray wrote, *"The lack of humility is the sufficient explanation of every defect and failure."*

Jesus served His disciples because of His humility and because of His love. Contrast John 13:1 with 1:11 and 3:16: Jesus came *"unto His own [world], and His own [people] received him not."* *"For God so loved the world."* In the Upper Room, Jesus ministered in love to His own disciples, and they received Him and what He had to say. The Greek text says, *"He loved them to the uttermost."*

HOLINESS: Jesus and Peter (John 13:6–11) ⁶ *So He came to Simon Peter. He said to Him, 'Lord, are You going to wash my feet?'* ⁷ *Jesus answered and said to him, 'What I am doing you do not realize now, but you will understand afterwards.'* ⁸ *Peter said to Him, 'You will never wash my feet—ever!'* *Jesus answered him, 'If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me.'* ⁹ *Simon Peter said to Him, 'Lord, not only my feet, but also my hands and my head.'* ¹⁰ *Jesus said to him, 'He who has bathed needs only to wash his feet but is completely clean; and you are clean, but not all of you.'* ¹¹ *For He knew the one who was betraying Him; for this reason, He said, 'Not all of you are clean.'"*

As Peter watched the Lord wash his friends' feet, he became increasingly disturbed and could not understand what Jesus was doing. As you read the life of Christ in the Gospels, you cannot help but notice how Peter often spoke impulsively out of his lack of understanding and was corrected by Jesus. Peter opposed Jesus going to the cross (Matthew 16:21–23), and he tried to manage our Lord's affairs at the Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1–8). He expressed the faith of the disciples (John 6:66–71) without realizing that one was a traitor.

The word translated “wash” in John 13:5–6, 8, 12, and 14 is *nipto*, which means “to wash a part of the body.” But the word translated “washed” in John 13:10 is *louo* and means “to bathe all over.” The distinction is important, for Jesus was trying to teach His disciples the importance of a holy walk.

When the sinner trusts the Savior, he is “*bathed all over*,” through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, and his sins are washed away and forgiven (see 1 Corinthians 6:9–11; Titus 3:3–7; and Revelation 1:5). “*And their sins and iniquities will I remember no more*” (Hebrews 10:17). However, as the believer walks in this world, it is easy to become defiled. He does not need to be bathed all over again; he simply needs to have that defilement cleansed away. God promises to cleanse us when we confess our sins to Him (1 John 1:9).

But why is it so important that we “*keep our feet clean*?” Because when we are defiled, we cannot have communion (fellowship) with our Lord. “*If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me*” (John 13:8). The word translated “*part*” is *meros*, and it carries the meaning here of “participation, having a share in someone or something.” When God “bathes us all over” in salvation, He brings about our *union* with Christ; which settles a relationship that can never change. (The verb *wash* in John 13:10 is in the perfect tense, meaning *settled once and for all*. However, our *communion (fellowship)* with Christ depends on our keeping ourselves “*unspotted from the world*” (James 1:27). If we permit unconfessed sin in our lives, we hinder our walk with the Lord; and that is when we need to have our feet washed.

This basic truth of Christian living is beautifully illustrated in the Old Testament priesthood. When the priest was consecrated, he was bathed all over (Exodus 29:4), and that experience was never repeated. However, during his daily ministry, if he became defiled, it was necessary that he wash his hands and feet at the brass laver in the courtyard (Exodus 30:18–21). Only then could he enter the holy place and trim the lamps, eat the holy bread, or burn the incense.

The Lord cleanses us through the blood of Christ, that is, His work on the cross (1 John 1:5–10), and through the application of His Word to our lives (Psalm 119:9; John 15:3; Ephesians 5:25–26). The “*water of the Word*” can keep our hearts and minds clean so that we will avoid the pollutions of this world. But if we do sin, we have a loving Advocate in glory who will hear our prayers of confession and forgive us (1 John 2:1–2).

Peter did not understand what his Lord was doing; but instead of waiting for an explanation, he impulsively tried to tell the Lord what to do. There is a strong double negative in John 13:8. The Greek scholar Kenneth Wuest translated Peter's statement, "*You shall by no means wash my feet, no, never.*" Peter really meant it! Then when he discovered that to refuse the Lord would mean to lose the Lord's fellowship, he went in the opposite direction and asked for a complete bath!

We can learn an important lesson from Peter: don't question the Lord's will or work, and don't try to change it. **He knows what He is doing.** Peter had a difficult time in personally accepting Christ's ministry *because Peter was not yet ready to minister to the other disciples.* It takes humility and grace to serve others, but it also takes humility and grace to allow others to serve us. The beautiful thing about a submissive spirit is that it can both give and receive to the glory of God.

John was careful to point out that Peter and Judas were in a different relationship with Jesus. Yes, Jesus washed Judas' feet! But it did Judas no good because he had not been bathed all over. Some people teach that Judas was a saved man who sinned away his salvation, but that is not what Jesus said. Our Lord made it very clear that Judas had never been cleansed from his sins and was an unbeliever (John 6:64–71).

It is a wonderful thing to deepen your fellowship with the Lord. The important thing is to be honest with Him and with ourselves and keep our *feet* clean.

HAPPINESS: Jesus and the Disciples (John 13:12–17) ¹² *So when He had washed their feet, and taken His garments and reclined at the table again, He said to them, 'Do you know what I have done to you? ¹³ You call Me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am. ¹⁴ If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵ For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you. ¹⁶ Truly, truly, I say to you, a slave is not greater than his master, nor is one who is sent greater than the one who sent him. ¹⁷ If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.'*

John 13:17 is the key, "*If you know these things, happy are you if you do them.*" The sequence is important: humbleness, holiness, then happiness. Aristotle defined happiness as "good fortune joined to virtue ... a life that is both agreeable and secure." That might do for a philosopher, but it will never do for a Christian believer! Happiness is the by-product of a life that is lived in the will of God. When we humbly serve others,

walk in God's holiness, and do what He tells us, then we will enjoy happiness because "what's happening" is the will of God!

Jesus asked the disciples if they understood what He had done, and it was unlikely that they did. So, He explained it: He had given them a lesson in humble service, an example for them to follow. The world thinks that happiness is the result of others serving us, but real joy comes when we serve others in the name of Christ. The world is constantly pursuing happiness, but that is like chasing a shadow: it is always just beyond reach.

Jesus was their Master, so He had every right to command their service. Instead, He served them! He gave them an example of true Christian ministry. On more than one occasion during the previous three years, He had taught them lessons about humility and service; but now He had demonstrated the lesson to them. Perhaps the disciples remembered His lesson about the child (Matthew 18:1–6), or the rebuke He gave James and John when they asked for thrones (Matthew 20:20–28). Now it was all starting to fall into place.

The servant (slave) is not greater than his master; so, if the master becomes a slave, where does that put the slave? *On the same level as the master!* By becoming a servant, our Lord did not push us down: He lifted us up! He dignified sacrifice and service. You must keep in mind that the Romans had no use for humility, and the Greeks despised manual labor. Jesus combined these two when He washed the disciples' feet.

The world asks, "How many people work for you?" but the Lord asks, "For how many people do you work?" We need leaders who will serve and servants who will lead. G.K. Chesterton said that a really great man is one who makes others feel great, and Jesus did this with His disciples *by teaching them to serve*.

Of course, it is not enough just to *know* this truth; we must put it into practice. James 1:22–27 makes it clear that the blessing comes in the *doing* of the Word, not the hearing. Wuest translates the last phrase in James 1:25, "This man shall be prospered spiritually in his doing." Even studying this section in John's Gospel can stir us emotionally or enlighten us intellectually; but it cannot bless us spiritually until we do what Jesus told us to do, which is the key to personal happiness.

Be sure to keep these lessons in their proper sequence: humbleness, holiness, happiness. Submit to the Father, keep your life clean, and serve others. This is God's formula for true spiritual joy.

HYPOCRISY: Jesus and Judas (John 13:18–35) ¹⁸ *I do not speak about all of you. I know the ones I have chosen; but that the Scripture may be fulfilled, “He who eats My bread has lifted up his heel against Me.”* ¹⁹ *From now on I am telling you before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am He.* ²⁰ *Truly, truly, I say to you, he who receives anyone I send receives Me; and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me.”* ²¹ *When Jesus had said these things, He became troubled in spirit, and bore witness and said, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, that one of you will betray Me.’* ²² *The disciples began looking at one another, perplexed about whom He spoke.* ²³ *There was reclining on Jesus’ bosom one of His disciples, whom Jesus loved.* ²⁴ *So Simon Peter gestured to him to inquire, ‘Who is the one of whom He is speaking?’* ²⁵ *He, leaning back thus on Jesus’ bosom, said to Him, ‘Lord, who is it’* ²⁶ *Jesus answered, ‘He is the one for whom I shall dip the piece of bread and give it to him.’* *So, when He had dipped the piece of bread, He took and gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot.* ²⁷ *And after the piece of bread, Satan then entered into him. Therefore, Jesus said to him, ‘What you do, do quickly.’* ²⁸ *Now no one of those reclining at the table knew for what purpose He had said this to him.* ²⁹ *For some were thinking, because Judas had the money box, that Jesus was saying to him, ‘Buy the things we have need of for the feast’; or else, that he should give something to the poor.* ³⁰ *So after receiving the piece of bread, he went out immediately. And it was night.* ³¹ *Therefore, when he had gone out, Jesus said, ‘Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in Him;’* ³² *if God is glorified in Him, God will also glorify Him in Himself and will glorify Him immediately.* ³³ *Little children, I am with you a little while longer. You will seek Me; and as I said to the Jews, now I also say to you, “Where I am going, you cannot come.”* ³⁴ *A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another.* ³⁵ *By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”* ³⁶ *Simon Peter said to Him, ‘Lord, where are You going?’* *Jesus answered, ‘Where I go, you cannot follow Me now; but you will follow later.’* ³⁷ *Peter said to Him, ‘Lord, why can I not follow You right now? I will lay down my life for You.’* ³⁸ *Jesus answered, ‘Will you lay down your life for Me? Truly, truly, I say to you, a rooster will not crow until you deny Me three times.’”*

A dark shadow now fell across the scene as Jesus dealt with Judas, the traitor. It is important to note that Judas was not a true believer; he was a hypocrite. He had never believed in Jesus (John 6:64–71), he had not been bathed all over (John 13:10–11), and he had not been among the chosen ones whom the Father gave to the Son (John 13:18

and 17:12). A person can come close to salvation and yet be lost forever! Judas was even the treasurer of the group (John 12:6) and was certainly held in high regard by his fellow disciples.

At that hour, Jesus had two great concerns: to fulfill the Word of God (John 13:18–30) and to magnify the glory of God (John 13:31–35). The Scripture Jesus quoted was Psalm 41:9—“Even my close friend in whom I trusted, Who ate my bread, Has lifted up his heel against me.” When David wrote the psalm, he was probably referring to his counselor Ahithophel, who turned traitor and joined Absalom’s rebellion (see 2 Samuel 15–17). It is significant that both Judas and Ahithophel committed suicide by hanging themselves (2 Samuel 17:23; Matthew 27:3–10; Acts 1:18). Of course, Judas was responsible for his own decisions, and those decisions fulfilled God’s Word.

Jesus was concerned that Judas’ treachery would not weaken His disciples’ faith. This is why He related it to the Word of God: when the disciples saw all of this fulfilled, it would make their faith stronger (see John 8:28). Judas had been disloyal, but He expected them to be loyal to Him and His cause. After all, He was God the Son sent by God the Father. They were Christ’s chosen representatives; to receive them would be the same as receiving the Father and the Son. What a privilege it is to be ambassadors of the King!

The remarkable thing is that the others at the table with Jesus did not know that Judas was an unbeliever and a traitor. Up to the very hour of his treachery, Judas was protected by the Savior whom he betrayed. Had Jesus openly revealed what He knew about Judas, it is likely that the men would have turned on him. Remember what Peter did to Malchus when soldiers came to take Jesus!

From the very beginning, Jesus knew what Judas would do (John 6:64), but He did not compel him to do it. Judas was exposed to the same spiritual privileges as the other disciples, yet they did him no good. The same sun that melts the ice only hardens the clay. In spite of all that our Lord said about money, and all of His warning about covetousness, Judas continued to be a thief and steal from the treasury. In spite of all our Lord’s warning about unbelief, Judas persisted in his rejection. *Jesus even washed Judas’ feet!* Yet his hard heart did not yield.

Jesus had spoken before about a traitor (John 6:70), but the disciples did not take it to heart. Now when He spoke openly about it at the table, His disciples were perplexed.

Peter signaled to John, who was the closest to Jesus at the table, and asked him to find out who the traitor was. The Lord's reply to John was certainly not heard by all the men; in fact, they were carrying on discussions among themselves about who the traitor might be (Luke 22:23). When Jesus gave the bread to Judas, it was interpreted as an act of love and honor. In fact, Judas was seated in the place of honor, so our Lord's actions were seen in that light: He was bestowing a special honor on Judas. No wonder, after Judas left the room, the disciples got into an argument over who was the greatest (Luke 22:24–30).

John was no doubt stunned by this revelation, but before he could say or do anything, Jesus had sent Judas on his way. Even though Satan had entered Judas, it was Jesus who was in charge. He lived on the timetable given to Him by the Father, and He wanted to fulfill what was written in the Word. Since Judas was the treasurer, it was logical for the disciples to conclude that he had been sent on a special mission by the Lord. Judas had hypocritically expressed an interest in the poor (John 12:4–6), so perhaps he was on an errand of mercy to help the poor.

Keep in mind that Judas knew what he was doing and that he did it deliberately. He had already met with the Jewish religious leaders and agreed to lead them to Jesus in such a way that there would not be any public disturbance (Luke 21:37–22:6). He heard Jesus say, *“Woe unto that man by whom the Son of man is betrayed! It had been good for that man if he had not been born!”* (Matthew 26:24) Yet he resisted in his unbelief and treachery.

John's little phrase *“and it was night”* carries a tremendous impact when you remember that *light* and *darkness* are important spiritual images in his Gospel. Jesus is the Light of the world (John 8:12), but Judas rejected Jesus and went out into darkness; and for Judas, *it is still night!* Those who do evil hate the light (John 3:18–21). Our Lord's warning in John 12:25–26 went unheeded by Judas—and it goes unheeded by lost sinners today, people who will go where Judas went unless they repent and trust the Savior.

The instant Judas was gone, the atmosphere was cleared, and Jesus began to instruct His disciples and prepare them for His crucifixion and His ultimate return to heaven. It was after Judas' departure that He instituted the Lord's Supper, something that Judas as an unbeliever certainly could not share. Judas was out in the night, controlled by the prince

of darkness, Satan; but Jesus was in the light, sharing love and truth with His beloved disciples. What a contrast!

The theme now changes to the glory of God (John 13:31–35). From the human perspective, the death of Christ was a terrible deed involving unspeakable suffering and humiliation; but from the divine perspective it was the revelation of the glory of God.

“The hour is come that the Son of man should be glorified” (John 12:23). Twelve times in this Gospel, the title *“Son of man”* appears, and this one in John 13:31 is the final instance. Daniel 7:13 identifies this title as messianic, and Jesus sometimes used it this way (Matthew 26:64).

What did it mean for Jesus to glorify the Father? He tells us in His prayer: *“I have glorified You on the earth; I have finished the work You gave Me to do”* (John 17:4). This is the way all of us glorify God, by faithfully doing what He calls us to do. In our Lord’s case, the Father’s will was that the Son die for lost sinners, be raised from the dead, and then ascend to heaven. The Son glorified the Father, and the Father glorified the Son (John 17:1, 5).

There would come a time when the Son would be glorified in these disciples (John 17:10), but they could not follow Him at that time. Peter boasted that he would follow the Lord even to death (Luke 22:33), but unfortunately, he ended up denying Him three times.

Jesus had said to the Jews on two occasions that they would seek Him but not be able to find Him or follow Him (John 7:33–36; 8:21–24). Note that He did not tell His disciples that they would not be able to find Him, but He did say that to the unbelieving Jews. One day the believing disciples would go to be with Him (John 14:1–3), and they would also see Him after His resurrection. But during this time of His suffering and death, it was important that they not try to follow Him.

There are sermons preached about the sin of Peter who *“followed afar off”* (Luke 22:54), with the emphasis that he should have followed nearer. The truth is that he should not have followed at all! The statement in John 13:33 is proof enough, and when you add Matthew 26:31 (quoted from Zechariah 13:7) and our Lord’s words in John 18:8, the evidence is conclusive. Because Peter disregarded this warning, he got into trouble.

The disciples’ responsibility was to love one another just as Christ had loved them. They would certainly need this love in the hours to follow, when their Master would be taken

from them and their brave spokesman, Peter, would fail Him and them. In fact, all of them would fail, and the only thing that would bring them together would be their love for Christ and for each other.

The word *love* is used only twelve times in John 1–12, but in John 13–21 it is used forty-four times! It is a key word in Christ's farewell sermon to His disciples, as well as a burden in His High Priestly Prayer (John 17:26). The word *new* does not mean "new in time," because love has been important to God's people even from Old Testament times (see Leviticus 19:18). It means "new in experience, fresh." It is the opposite of "worn out." Love would take on a new meaning and power because of the death of Christ on the cross (John 15:13). With the coming of the Holy Spirit, love would have a new power in their lives.

This section begins and ends with love: Jesus' love for His own (John 13:1) and the disciples' love for one another. It is love that is the true evidence that we belong to Jesus Christ. And how do we evidence that love? By doing what Jesus did: laying down our lives for the brethren (1 John 3:16). And the way to start is by getting down and washing one another's feet in sacrificial service.